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ABSTRACT

A few years ago, the concept of non-formal education was virtually unknown in the Lao People's Democratic Republic. Today, however, many understand the importance and relevance of non-formal education activities. This evolution is due to the implementation in several Laotian provinces of "Women's Literacy and Basic Skills Training," a project launched in 1994 by UNESCO with Norwegian funding. In the Lao People's Democratic Republic, schooling opportunities for girls have been limited for a long time. This is especially true for girls from ethnic minorities and those who live in some of the numerous isolated and mountainous regions. By implementing non-formal educational activities, this project, widely-known as 504/LAQ/11, has proved that it is possible to transmit basic knowledge, both general and technical, to young women who otherwise would have no access to education. (LB)

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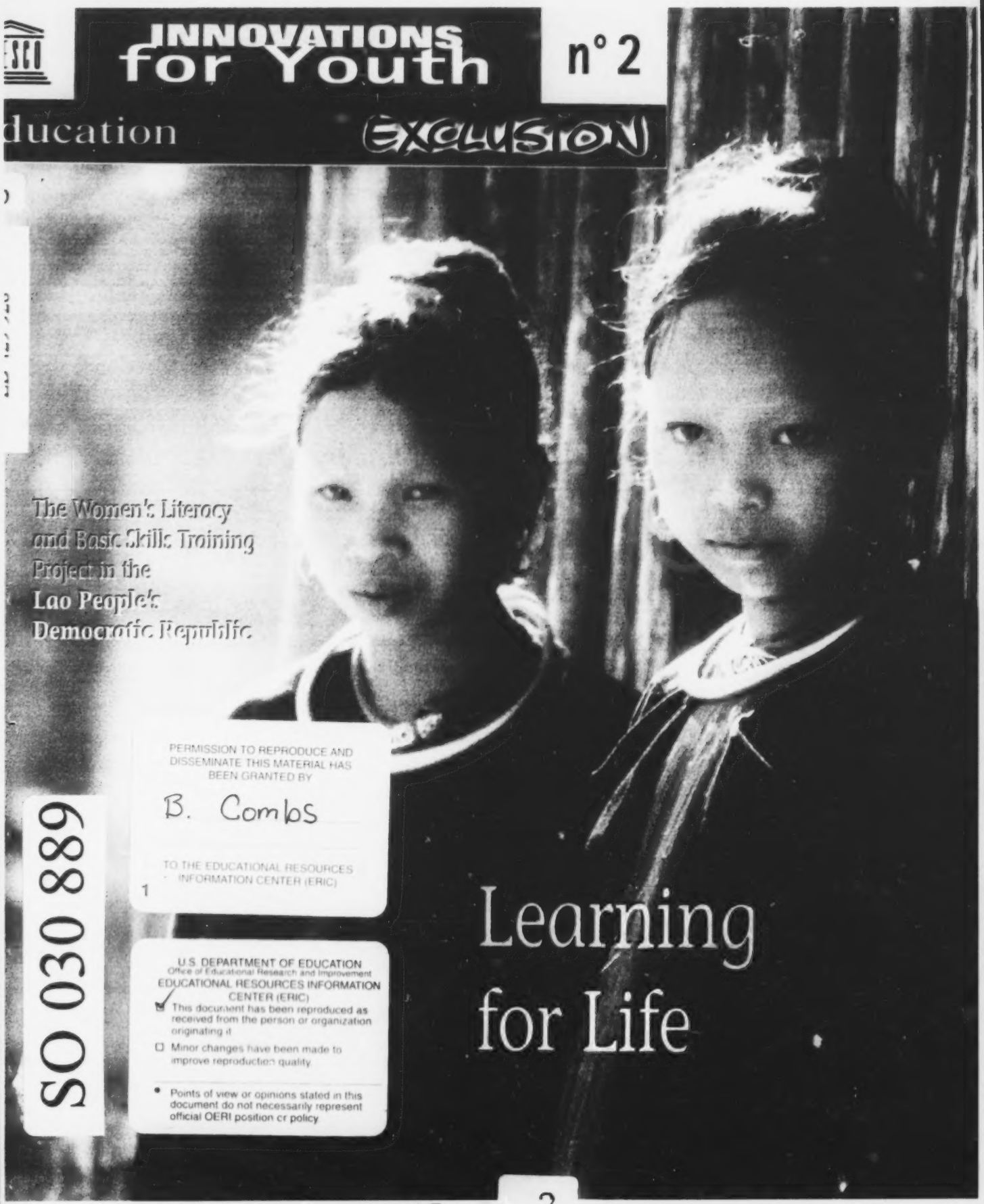
INNOVATIONS for Youth n°2

# Education EXCLUSION



## The Women's Literacy and Basic Skills Training Project in the Lao People's Democratic Republic

# Learning for Life

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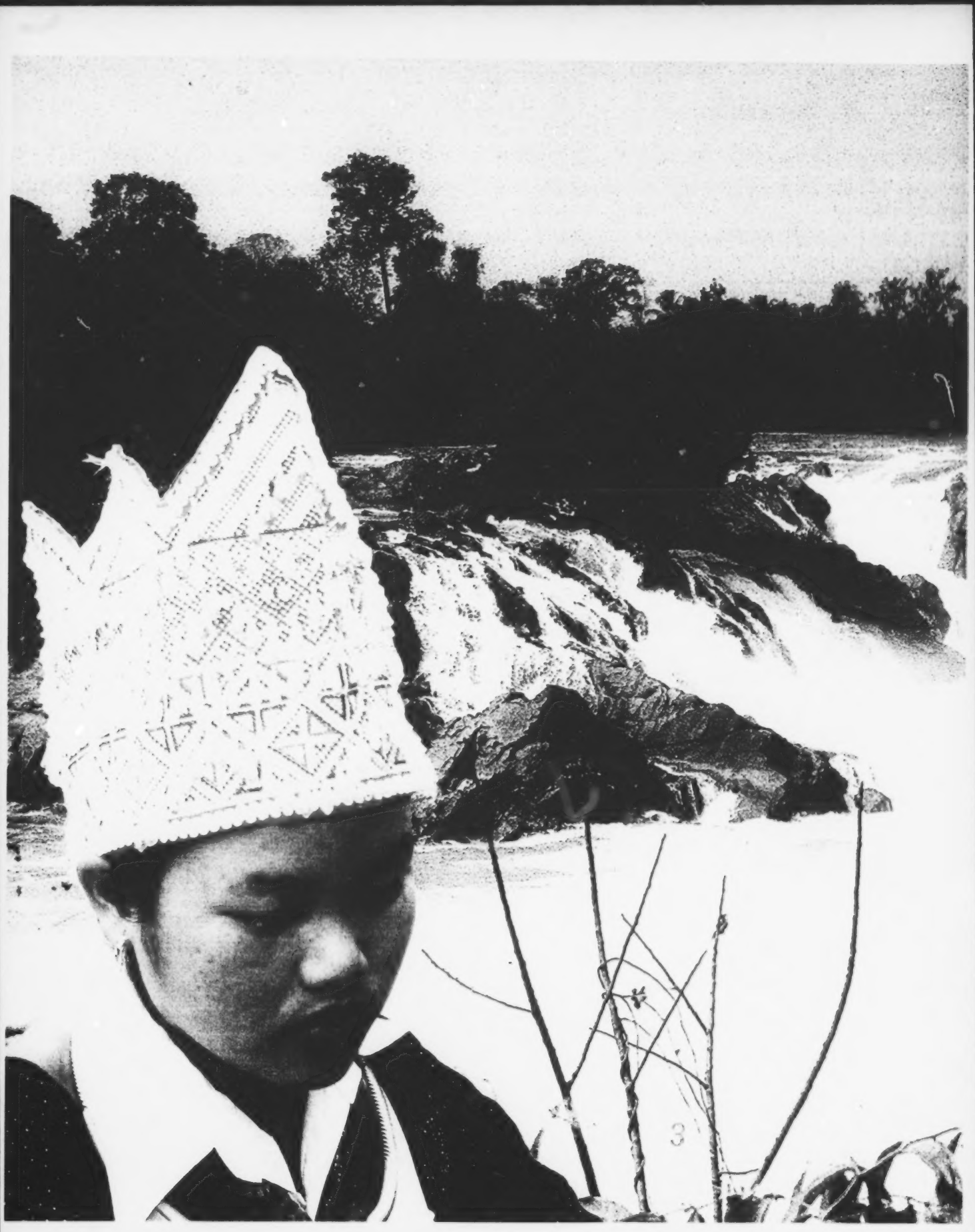

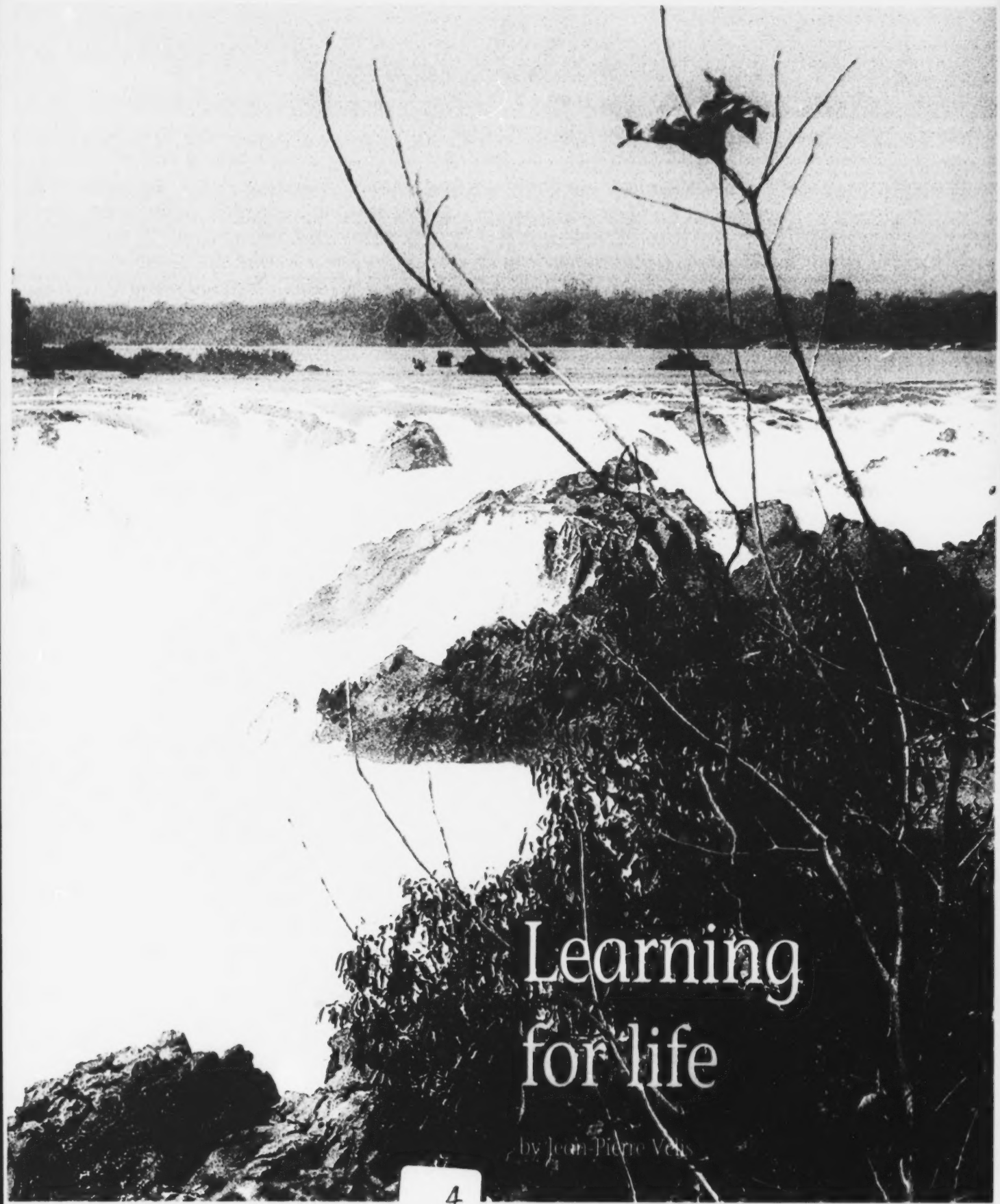

# Learning for life

by Jean-Pierre Veits

Education EXCLUSION

*What is being done today about the tide of exclusion facing so many of the world's young people? Images of youth unrest, unemployment, delinquency, despair and conflict are all too well-known, as is the discourse on their causes, but how well-known are the solutions being actively sought around the world, particularly in the countries of the South? With this present series, Innovations for Youth, UNESCO's youth project "EDUCATION TO FIGHT EXCLUSION" has decided to identify, promote and connect particular projects around the world, which are indicative of new trends and seem to hold rich lessons for all those combating youth marginalization. It is, indeed, vital that governments, UN agencies, international organizations, NGO's, educators and also communities learn of innovations for youth and acquire a new vision of how to approach young people's problems and learning needs. Current economic structures and education systems are obviously not serving the interests of young people. Merely advocating their expansion can only lead to further marginalization of young people and accordingly further jeopardize the future of the world. Change is urgently needed, particularly in the field of basic education.*

*As well as this series, UNESCO's project "EDUCATION TO FIGHT EXCLUSION" also directly supports a selection of projects in over 30 countries. This can mean developing practical skills such as food processing, recycling techniques, energy technologies or creating alternative forms of education such as learning through video and radio, night and street schools, youth camps, house construction programmes, schemes for the upgrading of slums. More often than not, these activities are in the non-formal education sector. Each of the UNESCO youth project's initiatives takes young people's knowledge and will for change as its starting point, using local creativity and, often, the popular or informal economy as the impetus for income-generating activities. Through the informal economy, where solidarity and entrepreneurial skills are vital, young people can acquire literacy skills and see the concrete results of learning, working together and setting up businesses.*

# A few words about the Project...

*The wealth of experience in the informal economy shows that young people, especially in the South, have not been waiting around for answers to be given to them. Instead, in the sprawling and crowded cities of the world, they have already begun to pull through, coming together in networks, creating associations and developing small jobs. It is UNESCO's task, today, to validate their work and use it as a way to elaborate strategies for change and create a renewed impetus for basic education for youth. The world can no longer afford to ignore the plight of its excluded, notably in developing countries. It is up to all those fighting for change to support projects and call for a better use of resources, creating a wider and more sustainable vision of the world and education where young people, even the most excluded, can find their place.*

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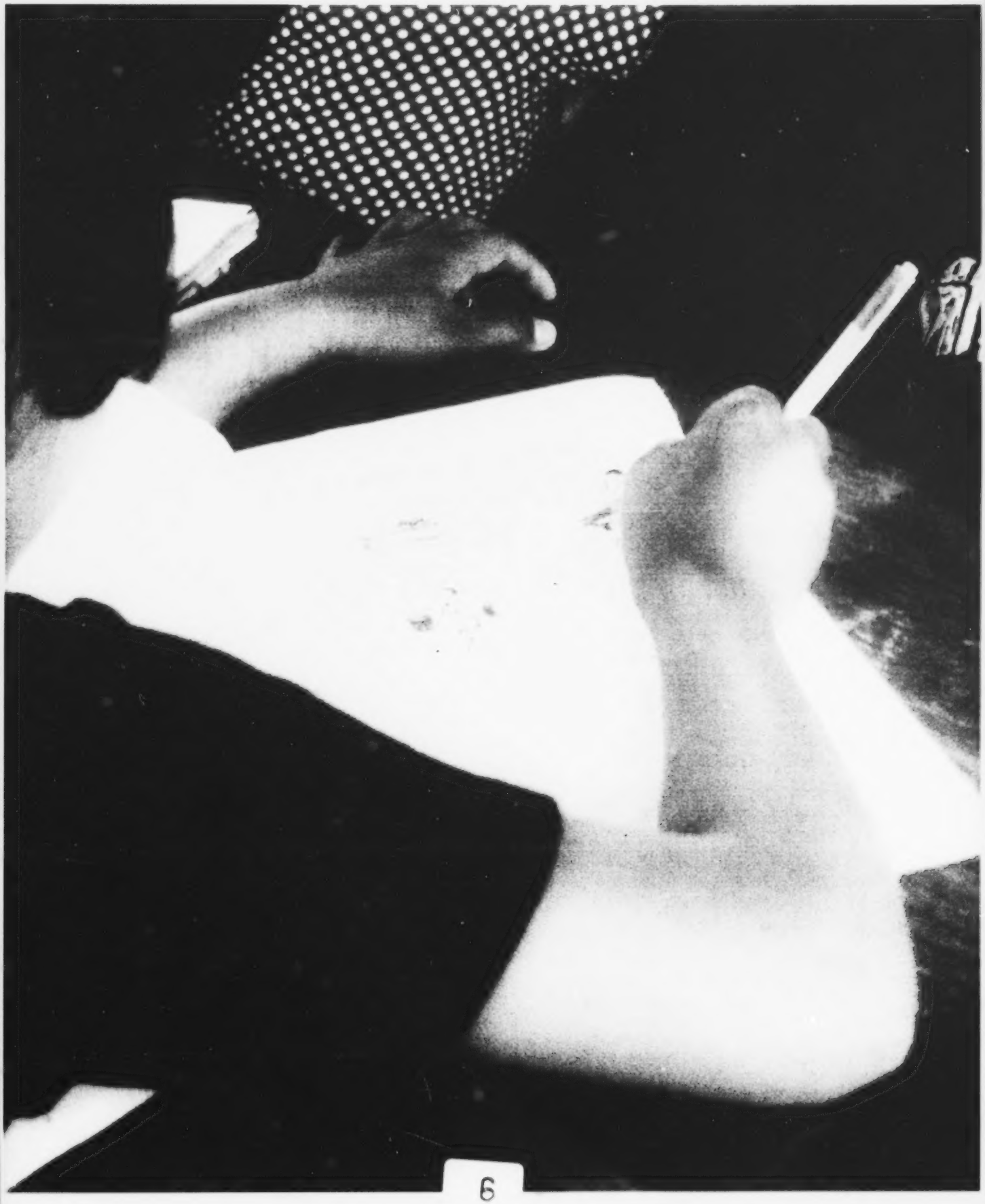

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Bibliography and acknowledgements

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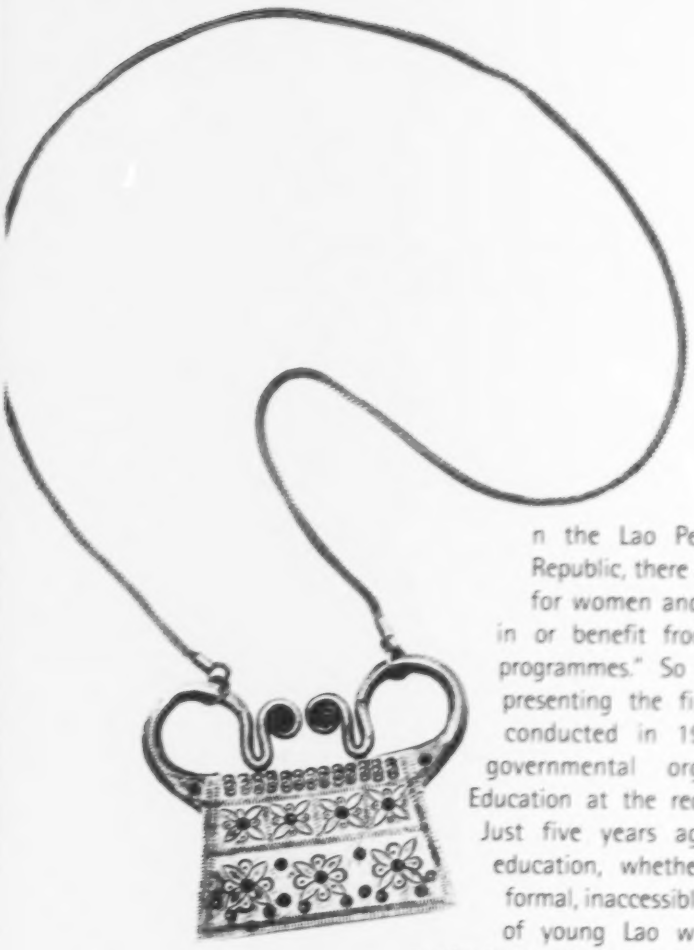


In the Lao People's Democratic Republic, there are few possibilities for women and girls to take part in or benefit from basic education programmes." So begins the report presenting the findings of a study conducted in 1993 by the non-governmental organization World Education at the request of UNESCO*. Just five years ago, not only was education, whether formal or non-formal, inaccessible to a great number of young Lao women and girls - particularly those belonging to ethnic minorities - but the very idea that women might lay claim to it was unknown to the population as a whole.

Against the current of these firmly established beliefs, in 1994, the Government of the Lao People's Democratic Republic launched the Women's Literacy and Basic Skills Training project, with UNESCO's assistance and funding by Norway.

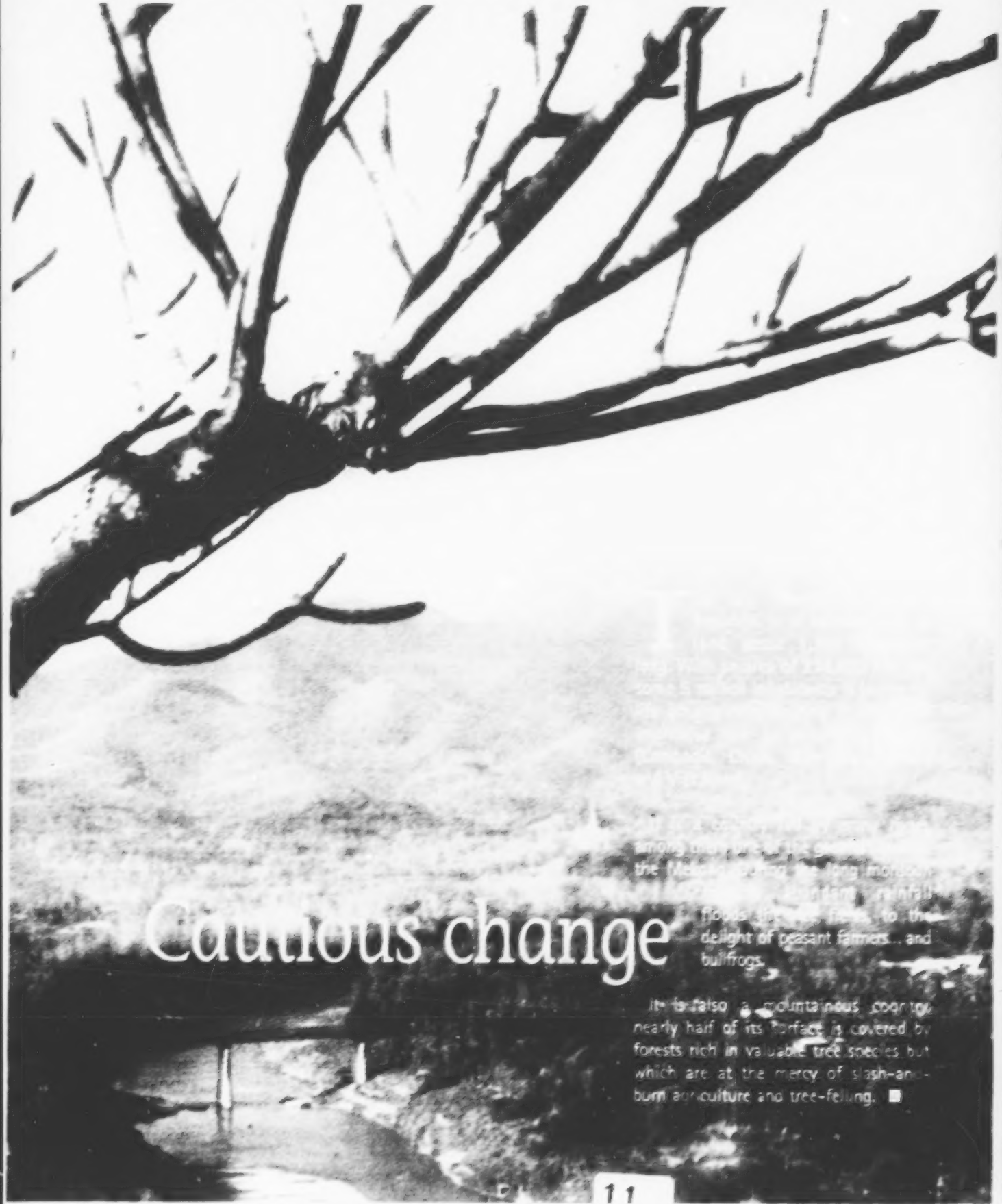
It should be said that initially the project was not devised as a youth project but as one for girls and women belonging to ethnic minorities or the most

* "Strategies for the promotion of basic education for women and girls", *by Shalmali Guttal, World Education, Lao People's Democratic Republic, December 1993.*

deprived social groups. It was thus not imagined from the outset to be a candidate for the present "Innovations for Youth" series, which aims to publish brochures on education projects fighting the exclusion of young people. The ongoing monitoring of the project, and its final evaluation after four years' execution in the field, definitely indicate, however, that it should be published in this series.

From the very beginning, the activities conducted concerned girls and very young women who otherwise would probably have had great difficulty in achieving self-fulfilment and contributing to their family's welfare. One way or another, they ran the risk of being excluded from the development of their villages, whereas today their place in development is enviable and often envied. In addition, the benefits of the non-formal education and basic skills training they have received from the project are such that today it is boys, excluded from education and any kind of training, who seek in their turn to benefit from them. This is such a rare occurrence that it should be hailed as a sure sign of success.

Lastly, we should note that its broad harvest of results and its scope have already made the Women's Literacy and Basic Skills Training project a reference throughout the Lao People's Democratic Republic, and that it is now beginning to exercise a not inconsiderable influence over educational thinking in general.



# Cautious change

...to the delight of peasant farmers... and bullfrogs.

...nearly half of its surface is covered by forests rich in valuable tree species but which are at the mercy of slash-and-burn agriculture and tree-felling. ■

Despite its natural wealth (including as yet little-worked deposits of precious stones and ores), the Lao People's Democratic Republic is a poor country. In 1995, per capita GNP was estimated at US $350. Life expectancy is 51 years, child mortality 125 per thousand; and infant mortality under the age of 5 is 182 per thousand. Almost half the children who survive are very likely to be chronically undernourished.

At the same time, increasingly rapid urbanization has occurred in the last few years, particularly in the capital, Vientiane. Until very recently a large administrative and market town, it has now been cautiously opened up to tourism. It suffers from - still moderate - traffic jams at peak hours and is polluted by the exhaust fumes from thousands of motorcycles, although admittedly, and fortunately, it does not rival the pollution problems of its neighbour, Bangkok, the Thai megalopolis with its millions of inhabitants. Nevertheless, more than half of the rural population and a quarter of the urban population are estimated to be poor.

The country's population is young (more than 50 per cent under the age of 20) with a marginally greater number of women (51 per cent) and forms a mosaic of some 50 ethnic groups consisting of three major classifications. The *Lao Loum* live in the plains and the Mekong valley (some 67 per cent of the population), the *Lao Theung* on the hillsides (some 23 per cent) and the *Lao Soung* in villages high in the mountains (some 10 per cent)*. The large number of ethnic groups also implies a large number of languages, cultures and traditions; not all Laotians necessarily speak Lao, the language of the largest group.

**This is not a scientific classification but one currently used. As this booklet was being written, the Lao Government, with technical support from France, was preparing a geographical and demographic atlas on methodical and more rigorously scientific lines. This long-term study was due to be completed and available in 1999.*

and the most disadvantaged, are not excluded from development. At the same time there is general awareness that the lasting success of this type of investment also depends on its effective contribution to the development of a healthy, well-fed and well-educated society. One type of development is not possible without the other but in what order?

The government has accordingly made rural development one of its main objectives, concentrating its efforts on developing human resources in all sectors. The state investment programme currently focuses on improving basic facilities, while non-formal education (NFE) with the provision of healthcare services, drinking-water, sanitation and an improvement in lifestyles form the next stage in the process.

It was with this in view that in 1994, with support from UNESCO and Norway, and aid from the non-governmental organization *Ecoles Sans Frontières* (Schools without Frontiers), and following a pilot experiment conducted in the Luang Namtha province, the government devised and launched the Women's Literacy and Basic Skills Training project.

Since 1986, the Lao People's Democratic Republic has been gradually moving towards a market economy. While the positive effects of this economic transition are generally recognized, it is also noted that the lack of communications, health and education facilities hampers any real rise in living standards for the majority of people. To date a great proportion of development funds has been invested in engineering projects, communications, agriculture, energy and forestry to ensure that whole sectors of the population, i.e. the most remote

The Lao education system is in theory organized on the lines of five years of primary schooling *('Pathom')* followed by three years each of lower and upper secondary schooling *('Mathayom')*. There are also some secondary technical classes and some first-level post-secondary training courses.

In reality, however, the situation is not so structured or reassuring. Officially, 64 per cent of adults are literate but only 35 per cent of women. Average school attendance figures are 2.9 years for the population as a whole, with 3.9 for men and 2.1 for women.

It is estimated that primary schooling covers 69 per cent of its age-group, but secondary schooling only 26 per cent and post-secondary establishments no more than 1 per cent. With the national drop-out rate standing at 60 per cent, it is no wonder that many of the children who have dropped out of primary school are in fact illiterate or semi-literate.

And there is every likelihood that they will remain so, since they live in an environment where almost nobody reads, and where writing is hardly used at all. In addition, these children have not received the slightest technical or vocational training.

## Extent of disparities

The possibilities of access to education vary strikingly according to region, urban or rural area, sex and ethnic group.

While the net school enrolment rate (the number of children aged 6 to 10 actually attending school at the end of the school year) in the municipality of Vientiane is 92 per cent, it is only 23 per cent in Sekong, one of the most disadvantaged provinces of the south. Some mountain regions have no schools whatsoever, and more than 4,000 villages (approximately one-third of the total number) have no local primary school facilities. This being the case, it frequently happens that children have never seen a book, held a pencil, or been inside a classroom.

The *Lao Loum*, however - who, as noted above, represent two-thirds of the population - total 77 per cent of enrolled primary-school pupils, more than 90 per cent in secondary schools and teacher training, and 96 per cent in post-secondary education.

Another disparity is that girls and women are under represented in the school system: they account for 44 per cent of school children, 40 per cent of teachers, 38 per cent of trainee-teachers, 28 per cent of students in higher education and 15 per cent of polytechnic students. More than half the girls from ethnic minorities do not attend school and most of those who do go no further than the second grade of primary education.

Pupil attendance figures are not the only negative factor. Many teachers tend to leave teaching in search of better pay elsewhere. The result is that some 35 per cent of primary teachers are underqualified, this percentage being higher still in the poorest provinces.

It will be seen that much remains to be done in education, and the government has made education for all a long-term investment priority for the future of the country. Improving the quality of teaching and extending education facilities to rural areas means a complete overhaul in many fields: curricula and methods, the quality and supply of textbooks and other teaching materials, teacher training, and reaching out to ethnic minorities. The Lao Government receives aid for this purpose from a number of partners, mainly the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank (ADB), UNICEF, Switzerland and Norway.

hile it is essential to improve the formal education system, it is clear that results will not be immediate. Following the World Conference on Education for All held in Jomtien (Thailand) in 1990, the Lao People's Democratic Republic adopted ambitious goals and within a very short time-scale:

- achieving literacy for 80 per cent of those aged between 15 and 40 by the year 2000;
- providing 50 per cent of the newly literate with basic education programmes equivalent to a complete primary course, as well as the possibility of acquiring basic skills or vocational training.

To meet these challenges, a National Centre was set up in Vientiane in 1992 to draw up a teaching programme and prepare textbooks and all other necessary teaching materials. In 1993, the government decided to put another iron in the fire by changing what was then the Ministry of Education's Adult Education Department to a Non-Formal Education Department (NFED). Thanks to the cooperation of all the provincial education services, this new department has special responsibility for orchestrating a major national literacy campaign aimed at teaching some 40,000 illiterate adults to read and write each year up to the year 2000; also for coordinating non-formal education projects supported by bilateral or international partners. An example is the Women's Literacy and Basic Skills Training project, supported by UNESCO and Norway, best known under its administrative reference number 504/LAO/11. It has the largest scope, funding resources and influence.

The Lao People's Democratic Republic has thus established a non-formal education mechanism *('Bamlung Vathanatam')* which should provide a second chance for all illiterate adults: that is the opportunity of acquiring, in three years, a level of basic education equivalent to that of the five years of primary schooling, and even of attending, in the subsequent four years, a specific programme leading to the level normally achieved during the six years of secondary schooling.

The Women's Literacy and Basic Skills Training project was founded on the very logical argument that since great numbers of girls and women, especially in ethnic minorities, have had no schooling simply because in most cases it is not accessible, they should be given a second chance by being reached as closely as possible, in terms of both distance and educational content. There is no question of providing them with schools of a traditional type; instead, the aim is to set up learning centres in which they can receive basic education suited to their needs and context.

Basic education, yes, but for what purpose? To improve their living conditions and those of their families. Learning to read, write and do arithmetic (the basic "three Rs") is an advantage no one denies but on its own it is not enough to meet all needs. It is admittedly a necessary key, but no more than a key. Over and above this, women and girls need to have the opportunity of acquiring skills which will make them more efficient in essential, not to say vital, fields of everyday life directly related to their environment, such as hygiene, health, food, gardening and keeping small livestock. This is something that women themselves will see as a useful incentive to becoming literate, something which, at first sight, might not appeal to them. They might argue that there is no point, as an adult, in learning to read or write when there is nothing to read and no reason to write, and when they also have such a heavy workload of inescapable chores. However, learning to be literate so as to accede to useful skills which will help to lighten their daily burdens, improve everyday life and prevent possible misfortunes, all this can make sense... and be attractive.

In this respect, there was nothing particularly new in comparison with what is usually called "functional" literacy. Yet, the 504/LAO/11 project aimed to be more ambitious and break new

ground. It would teach reading, writing and arithmetic and basic skills - all components of basic education - but would also teach the rudiments of techniques which would enable women to engage in gainful work and thus increase their family's income. This held out a tangible promise... and was an added attraction.

But having begun so well, why stop halfway, why not push on to the logical conclusion? If a woman taking part in the project has succeeded at all stages of the different forms of learning and training offered her, then surely she can be given additional help to carry out a "mini-project" devised by herself on the basis of her newly acquired skills (an "income-generating activity"). For example, a small loan might be made available to her for starting up her projected activity and then be passed on to another young woman once she has repaid it (a "revolving fund"). This might be an even more attractive idea.

These are the broad lines of the logic behind the 504/LAO/11 project. Once the "whos" and the "whys" of the project were well defined, there remained to be considered certain "minor" technical details such as "what", "where", "when" and "how". Putting the case forcefully, what were the contents to be taught, under what programme? What were the techniques to be taught, with what teaching materials? In what centres, and who was to build them, with what resources? When, at what rate and for how long? Who would be the teachers responsible for this unprecedented kind of non-formal education in the Lao People's Democratic Republic, i.e. the literacy workers and technical trainers?

t should be realized that only a very few years ago all these ideas were entirely new to the country. The very concept of non-formal education was in itself an innovation. Thus, obviously, no ready-made programme existed and there were no properly trained teachers. Begun in 1994, the 504/LAO/11 project has contributed greatly during its four years of execution in the field to laying the foundation of non-formal education in the Lao People's Democratic Republic by supplying the ingredients that were vital in order to secure a long-lasting project. Of these, the first were the trainers.

The national non-formal education centre, known in Vientiane as the Km 8 Centre, played a key role in this enterprise from the outset. It organized the meetings and seminars necessary for discussion and exchanges of ideas, and also the initial training courses for the project's trainers, both men and women. It likewise prepared the teaching programme and planned much of the teaching material, as well as a post-literacy journal entitled *Xao Ban*.

Government employees, mostly men and women teachers trained in one of the country's teacher training colleges, were invited to work at Km 8. The project enabled some of them to go on study tours in countries of the region with more experience of non-formal education, such as China, Viet Nam and in particular Thailand, where non-formal education has been in place for several decades. In addition, the similarity between the Thai and Lao languages made for fruitful exchanges. Three people were awarded a project-financed grant to continue studying with a view to obtaining a master's degree in non-formal education at a Thai university. A total of nearly 70 civil servants were trained in this way to become the basic supervisory personnel for non-formal education in the Lao People's Democratic Republic, both in Vientiane and in the provincial and district education services where the project was carried out*, and in the two regional non-formal education centres subsequently set up in Paksé for the south and Luang Prabang for the north. In four years, more than 350 people attended training sessions organized under the project, including more than 100 men and women trainers appointed directly to work in the centres, who were given special induction training in adult education methods. More than 60 per cent of these were women.

With the assistance of technicians from the NGO *Ecoles sans Frontières* already involved in the training of trainers, the staff of the national NFE Centre prepared a special non-formal education programme, with 60 per cent of its content divided up into 16 thematic brochures, illustrated and embellished with posters. The Paksé and Luang Prabang Regional Centres produced the remaining 40 per cent of brochures, adapting them to the local context of the provinces of the south and the north.

** The project was carried out in the provinces of Luang Prabang, Luang Namtha and Sayaboury in the north; Xieng Khouang and Vientiane Province in the centre; Champasak and Saravane in the south, plus the special Saysomboune zone.*



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It was these brochures and various supplementary educational materials which the trainers learned to use at their training sessions.

The basic techniques chosen to be taught in the centres were two subjects much sought after in many regions of the country for their immediate home usefulness or the possibility of earning a little money: these were dressmaking and weaving. The Lao People's Democratic Republic has a great tradition of weaving on hand looms with natural raw materials (silk or cotton and dyes), and using traditional motifs which vary from one region to another and are in some cases very ancient. The textiles woven in the project are immediately put to use in everyday life, for example in making the *'sinh'*, a traditional straight skirt worn by many women, particularly among the *Lao Loum*.

However, it has often been pointed out that in being confined to two basic techniques, the project has so far lacked flexibility. The practice of weaving is not widespread throughout the country and is even entirely alien to the traditions of certain ethnic minorities, while other craft techniques have been neglected such as embroidery, pottery and basket-making, to cite only a few examples.

Trainers in basic techniques are usually recruited locally and the project pays them a monthly allowance. Most of them are people who are highly proficient in dressmaking or weaving, since frequently they have engaged in these professionally. However, over the years, some sufficiently gifted former pupils have also been recruited as trainers. The great majority of trainers are women. Before being confronted with their pupils, most of them receive special adult education training, since being proficient in a technique does not necessarily mean that one knows how to pass it on to someone else. The task is all the more difficult when the pupils are adolescents or young adults whose level of general education is very low. For example, it is advisable for a dressmaker to be able to count, so as to take measurements and relate them to a pattern. Training sessions have usually been organized in NFE Regional Centres, but they are also held in district education services.

on-formal education doesn't usually take place in school, but in a learning centre where pupils should have the opportunity of not only being taught but also of exchanging ideas or obtaining information. The chances of such places being successful depend to a great extent on their integration within the local environment, that is to say, the tolerant understanding and effective participation of the communities concerned. As a first sign of their commitment, the 504/LAO/11 project centres were built by the villagers themselves, under the direction of local committees and with material assistance from district or provincial authorities or local associations, in particular the Women's Union. There was no question of major building projects. The centres reflect traditional village structures making extensive use of local materials such as bamboo. This does not make them permanent buildings which will stand the test of time, but it makes it possible, when necessary, as has happened in Muang Xing, for stalwart villagers to get together and actually transport them from one site to another. This indicates the extent of the community's commitment to the project and its expansion.

The Luang Namtha pilot experiment showed that, in many cases, in order to get pupils to enrol in learning centres and make sure that they did not drop out, it was necessary to offer them accommodation and also catering facilities, for example supplies of rice, which is the staple diet in the Lao People's Democratic Republic. Many of the project's centres accordingly comprise not only literacy teaching premises and sewing and weaving workshops but also a dormitory, a kitchen and very often a kitchen garden and a small chicken run. In some cases the provincial administration also provides rice.

Thus, in four years, 23 Community Learning Centres have been built in the seven provinces in which the project has been introduced. Each centre can accommodate some 40 pupils per session, lasting six months from November to the end of April. In the remaining months, pupils are usually needed by their families to work in the fields; in any case, the monsoon and its rainy season often make roads impossible and any kind of travel an ordeal.

The 40 girls and women of a learning centre are usually under the supervision of four trainers, one each for literacy, post-literacy training, sewing and weaving, with one of them - usually the literacy teacher - acting as director. Contrary to the expectations of the project's designers, only a minority of women are directors (11 per cent). However, it is often pointed out that the presence of so many girls and women can sometimes arouse "too much" interest among the young male villagers, and that it is a very good, not to say salutary, idea to have a man directing the centre.

Each centre has the teaching materials produced by the NFE Centres (the 16-brochure literacy programme, guides to weaving, posters, etc.) and also strip cartoons developed by *Ecoles Sans Frontières* and other materials produced with UNICEF support. Some centres have received wooden cases that can be opened up into mini portable libraries (with booklets, posters, information, etc). These can be used as lending libraries with reading matter for pupils, and

Community understanding and

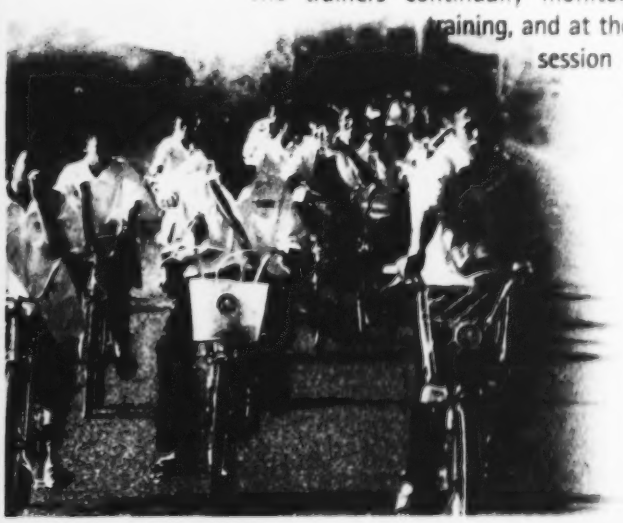
sometimes even for villagers. Project financing has helped the provincial administrations concerned to supply each centre on average with ten sewing machines and ten looms.

One should not imagine that, once open, the centres were submerged by a flood of pupils. Young women, especially of the *Lao Theung* and *Lao Soung* minorities, did not rush spontaneously to enrol. On the contrary, many reasons held them back. In the first place, many villagers are not convinced that education, whether traditional or non-formal, is worthwhile, especially for girls; and they have no desire to see their womenfolk lined up on the benches of a literacy schoolroom. Secondly, in some ethnic minorities, it is culturally inconceivable for a young woman to leave the village unaccompanied. Furthermore, it is felt that girls who do not speak Lao may find it difficult to learn to read and write in that language. The distance between the centre and the home village may be another drawback, as is also the question of board and lodging, in particular the catering arrangements. Lastly, in the Lao People's Democratic Republic - and surely this also applies elsewhere in the world - husbands often consider that a wife should live with her husband, not sleep away from home in a dormitory, especially if she has children.

So new ideas have had to be found to tackle all these obstacles. The language problem has often been eased by the ethnic mix of pupils and the fact that the centres' trainers frequently include women who themselves come from the local ethnic minority. When they are welcomed in their mother tongue, pupils are able to integrate fairly rapidly and become used to the Lao language. But this is obviously an area in which much remains to be done. The ideal solution would be for trainers to receive training in teaching Lao as a second language. Today, however, there is still no foreseeable prospect of second language teaching.

The food problem has been solved by the provision of a little kitchen garden surrounding each centre, the rearing of small livestock, or, better still, an allowance of rice from the provincial authorities. But in certain centres living conditions are still so difficult that pupils drop out during the session. The problem of distance has been reduced as far as possible by relocating centres nearer the most remote villages. Some centres have even been relocated several times during the four years of the project.

s it neared completion in 1998, the project underwent a final external evaluation. This indicated clearly that the various efforts to make it more responsive to the needs of potential beneficiaries had been fruitful. To sum up, in four years a total of nearly 3,200 girls and women enrolled voluntarily in the project's 23 centres, and 2,759 actually regularly took part in the activities proposed. The percentages were 34 per cent *Lao Loum*, 42 per cent *Lao Theung* and 24 per cent *Lao Soung*, so that, in line with the objectives sought, a large majority of young women from ethnic minorities did in fact benefit from the project. Furthermore, the average dropout rate was 12 per cent (very much less than the 30 per cent deemed acceptable in the Project Document), which proves that the training provided in the centres answered a real need.



The trainers continually monitor the pupils' training, and at the end of each session officials from the district education service come to test their ability to read, write, calculate and solve problems. The pass rate appears to have been total, since after the test all the pupils were declared literate and were accordingly awarded the official certificate issued by the Department of Non-Formal Education.

It is much more difficult to measure exactly the real benefits of post-literacy training. It is recognized that the effects of acquiring basic skills become manifest over a longer term, provided that there is the additional precaution of establishing significant benchmarks from the outset so that any improvements can be properly appraised. Here improvements vary widely. For example, in one centre, trainers will openly say: "Before attending the centre, many young women had no notion of hygiene. They were dirty and did not wash for days on end. Today they have got into the habit of washing daily, and wearing clean clothes." In the course of a village visit, some peasant farmers said that before the centre was built «there were no latrines in the village, but now every house has a latrine of some kind. Pigs roamed freely through the village, whereas today they are kept penned in». In another village there had been «no case of cholera or diarrhoea this year», and far fewer children had been ill. Many women who have attended a centre are glad to say that they are now able to help their children with their lessons. One woman even proudly displays the blackboard in her house, on which she helps her children do their evening homework. In yet another village, where formerly no woman had

been to school or been taught literacy, since the value of education was not recognized, still less appreciated, one woman says that she wants her own children to have as much education as possible. However, one cannot claim with full certainty that these beneficial changes are a direct result of the project. In the absence of rigorously established indicators and information compiled methodically from the start and regularly updated, it is risky to draw conclusions on the subject.

The evaluation did however reveal some minor surprises. In line with its logical approach, the project was designed for girls and women having very little or no education. It will be recalled that, as its title indicates, the 504/LAO/11 project was primarily a "literacy and basic skills training" project. In fact, the educational levels of participants ranged widely from nothing up to eight years' schooling. Some 10 per cent had reached or even completed lower secondary education.

Pupils in the latter category are not in fact interested in the centres' literacy sessions. What interests them is post-literacy activities, which are beneficial for improving their skills in the very useful fields of everyday life such as hygiene, health, cookery recipes, gardening, keeping domestic animals, etc. But let us have no illusions: their main reason for attending centres is to learn a technique that will enable them to earn an income and improve everyday life for the family. There are even cases of girls attending two full training sessions so as to learn weaving at the first and sewing at the second (see the box "Vansy").

This trend is borne out by the unexpected and growing number of men applying to take advantage of the project. For example, in Ban Hôkhong, in the province of Saravane, men can already be seen in the project centre working on sewing machines. Officials of the Sayaboury province education service are even planning to go further in the future, and open the centres widely to men. The centres might then teach new techniques traditionally reserved for men, such as ironworking and basketry. Thus a surprising result is that the project centres tend to be seen by the villagers, and some of the supervisory training staff, as vocational training centres. This goes far beyond their original purpose, and will certainly raise problems, since they have not been so designed, nor have their trainers been trained to provide vocational education.

nce they are literate, have acquired basic skills in the main fields of everyday life, and are trained as dressmakers or weavers, or even both, young women are invited to prepare a personal "mini-project" proposing an activity they wish to engage in on their return to the village. It is not surprising that their projects for "income-generating activities" are almost always directly linked with the subjects taught at the training session. One young woman wants to buy a sewing machine so as to earn a little more money at home doing odd jobs for her family or friends using the skills she has acquired; another, to use the cookery recipes she has learned to open a soup stall. Another would like to set up as a professional weaver. Her husband or father is prepared to construct a loom, but she still needs to buy small parts for it, which are more difficult to produce - cards and shuttles or raw material such as thread. Many would like to start keeping hens or ducks, or even buy a pig.

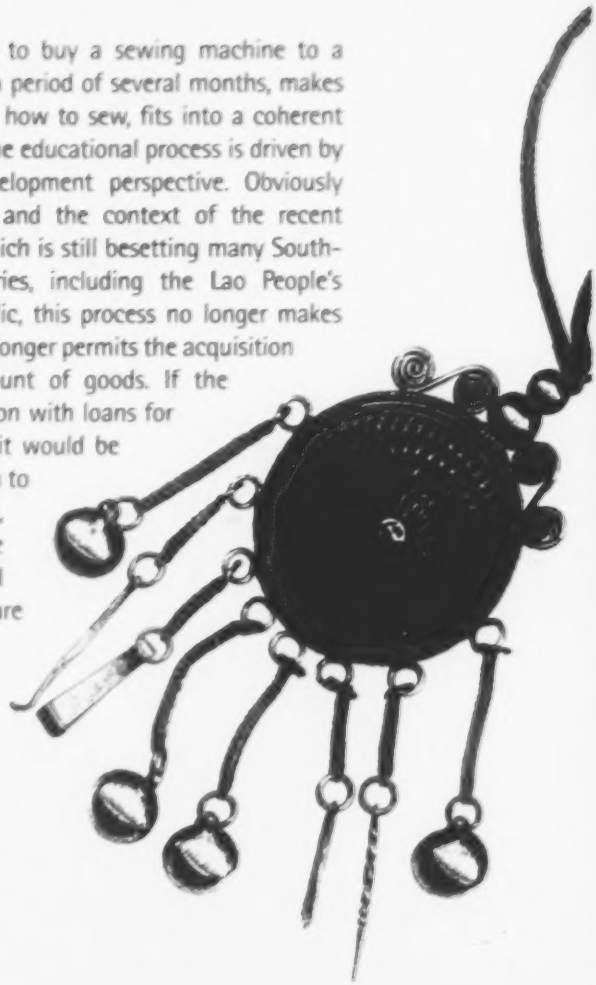
Almost all the women participants in the project devised a "mini-project"; the exceptions were those who were afraid that they would not be able to reimburse a loan. Once a "mini-project" has been examined by the local project management committee, each pupil is given a sum of money to finance it, provided she reimburses it by agreed stages over a period clearly accepted and countersigned in a form specially prepared by the DNFE. When all the reimbursement dates have been met and the original sum repaid to the local fund, another young woman will be able to benefit in the same way, with the loan thus constituting a "revolving fund".

Initially, the project planners fixed the amount of the individual revolving fund at a total of US $65. This was no chance decision, but corresponded at the time to the cost of a sewing machine or the equivalent in Lao currency of 45,000 kips. It was also stipulated that the loan should be reimbursed over three years. There was no mention of charging interest of any kind.

When this theoretically simple arrangement was put into practice, the government employees responsible for administering the project nevertheless made some minor errors. Firstly, the reimbursement schedules were not the same everywhere. Depending on each case, reimbursement schedules can last two to three years as their number of payments can be variable. Secondly, in some

places interest was charged, at varying rates depending on the centre. For example, in Vientiane province a lump sum reimbursement of 5,000 kips is required; in Sayaboury 1 per cent interest is charged, while in Xieng Khouang 5 per cent is charged to defray the village committee's management costs.

Next, from the start of the project the recipients were paid in national currency; but, since then, the amount has never been reviewed. During the four years of the project, each beneficiary systematically received 45,000 kips, and undertook naturally to reimburse the same amount. Yet during these four years the Lao currency was severely devalued, apparently without this factor catching anyone's attention within the project. The result, on the one hand, was that the loan system became unfair, since the value of the loan varied according to the date upon which it was received. On the other, recipients were reimbursing a sum amounting to less than that which they had received (in exactly inverse proportion to the devaluation rate over the same period). The result was that the project lost money. And, lastly the logical purpose of the revolving fund has lost much of its meaning: the lending of the amount necessary to buy a sewing machine to a person who, over a period of several months, makes the effort to learn how to sew, fits into a coherent approach, where the educational process is driven by a sustainable development perspective. Obviously with devaluation, and the context of the recent economic crisis which is still besetting many South-East Asian countries, including the Lao People's Democratic Republic, this process no longer makes sense. The loan no longer permits the acquisition of the same amount of goods. If the project is to carry on with loans for sewing machines, it would be more accurate then to talk of assistance, or even a gift. The immediate and long-term results are by no means the same.



# Avoiding black-and-white judgements





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FEATURES

# Aiming at a 'literate' environment

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## A village newspaper



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# Overcoming distance

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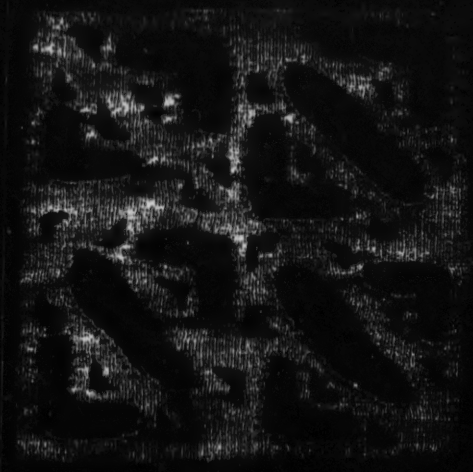

# Portrait

## Vassy

Vassy is a 12-year-old Tampuli girl. She lives in a village some four kilometres from Bon Bateman in the province of Sayclouny, and walks the distance there and back every day to attend the Community Learning Centre opened by the project in Bon Nabolum. Her father was the head teacher of a one-class college some 30 kilometres away but died when she was only three years old. She was then brought up by her grandparents. She has completed primary schooling and masters reading, writing and arithmetic. Last year she attended the centre and became interested in learning to weave. Today, thanks to a revolving fund granted her under the project, she possesses a weaving loom and has already produced three "sinn" (the traditional tube skirt) for members of her family. This year she again volunteered to learn sewing. She is also acquiring basic skills in cookery, health and hygiene. In the evening, after a good hour's walk, she helps with the family chores by fetching water and feeding the home's animals. ■



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# Portrait
# *Soumthaly*

*Ms Soumthaly is aged 38. She is Lao Loum, married and has seven children. She lives in Houakong in the province of Champasak. Trained at the Lao Inter Training College in Pakse, the provincial capital, she worked as a teacher for some years, first in primary and then in secondary education. It was by listening to the radio that she learned that the provincial education service was recruiting a trainer to work in a non-formal education centre for women, particularly women from local ethnic minorities, which was due to open in Houakong.*

*As a teacher, living in the area, and in addition speaking the language of the Laven fluently, since she has herself belongs to this ethnic group (part of the Lao Theung group), she immediately applied for the job. She was recruited and attended two training sessions at the NFE Regional Centre in Pakse to learn the specific of adult education. Since the centre's opening in 1995, she has been both its director and literacy teacher.*

*Sewing is taught by a young 24 year old woman from the village. Weaving is taught by a 30 year old man with a degree in literature and language. He is a former secondary school teacher, but who chose to come to the village because of his passion for weaving, which he previously only carried out as a pastime.*

*Ms Soumthaly is a government employee and receives 7,000 kips from the project over and above her normal salary. She expresses great satisfaction in her work, even if she has difficulties in recruiting pupils. For each session she has to go to the villages, and convince girls, women and their families of the advantages of the project. Here her knowledge of the Laven's language is a great asset. She has only one regret, that the training sessions she attended were too short and too few (four days in 1995, eight days in 1997). She would very much like to attend additional training courses, particularly to improve the management of the Centre.* ■



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# Portrait
# *Khamany*

*Khamany is 19 years old. She was born in the village of Ban Pak Phak, Sayaboury. She is the eldest of nine children (six sisters and two brothers). She attended school in her village up to "P4" level, which means that she did not complete primary schooling but has nevertheless acquired a good standard of reading and writing. For two years after school, she had to help her father cultivate rice in the rain-fed rice field on a mountainside cleared by the slash-and-burn method. This year she is attending post-literacy and weaving courses at the Ban Naloumm Centre, some four kilometres from her village. Her father has himself built a loom and bought the necessary supplies (cards, shuttles, thread, etc.) in the district market so that she can weave at home. She is already fairly skilled and says that she can weave a cloth in two days. She has already sold six to the village women. In this way she helps to improve the whole family's standard of living.* ■

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# Some questions about the future

After four years implementation, and now that, as foreseen, UNESCO and Norwegian assistance is coming to an end, the obvious question is: can the project carry on indefinitely? Many of the project officials, starting with its Director, who is also the Director of the DNFE, are both confident and determined. They believe that the project has proved itself successful, and they mean to continue it at all costs by gradually decentralizing responsibility and management directly to the provinces, although general supervision will be retained by the central administration. A budget forecast has been prepared and official requests have already been made to the government authorities concerned. There is the same determination in the provincial education services where, in some cases, without even waiting for the green light from the capital, new centres have already been opened where they were most urgently required.

There is no doubt that the 504/LAO/11 project has taken a considerable step forward by enabling non-formal education in the Lao People's Democratic Republic to secure sustainable resources for the future. The Non-Formal Education Centres in Vientiane, Pakse and Luang Prabang have now proved what they can do. They are not content with operating only for the 504/LAO/11 project, but have gradually extended their field of action to compulsory service in the national literacy campaign and have also undertaken new tasks with support from other partners such as the German agency GTZ, UNDP and UNICEF.

Supervisory staff, educators and trainers have been trained at all levels, from community centres in remote villages right up to a ministerial department at the capital, including the district and provincial education services. There are admittedly some deficiencies as shown by the unsatisfactory management of revolving funds, but this is in no way a condemnation of the system. We can be sure that the Lao People's Democratic Republic will soon put things right and find the necessary resources to set up suitable training courses for trainers in this field.

It is often said that "every cloud has a silver lining". Basically, this "hiccup" may give us an opportunity of asking ourselves constructively about the merits of non-formal education and assessing the point beyond which it cannot do everything on its own. It is, of course, always possible to teach supervisory staff and educators better management of revolving funds, but is this really their function? Would it not be better to have recourse here to back-up assistance from competent personnel who might well be recruited from the economic sector? Should we expect educators in community learning centres to be health agents, veterinary surgeons, agricultural engineers, foresters or, perhaps even in the near future, marketing specialists? The real solution seems to be an well-balanced integration of activities and mutually recognized complementarity linking the action of all parties for the greater benefit of all, beginning with the project beneficiaries themselves.

In its understandable attempt to achieve immediately viable economic outlets for its beneficiaries and their families, the project has run the risk of overreaching itself. The ups and downs encountered in trying to do everything remind us that we must know where to stop: it is probably better to be modest, and to consider non-formal education as the bedrock on which it is possible to develop community development activities. And we should go no further. And that's already a lot! In the Lao People's Democratic Republic there is a proverb which says that "getting a woman to come to school is as difficult as dragging a tortoise by the foot". The Women's Literacy and Basic Skills Training project, thus managed in its own way, to do exactly that ■



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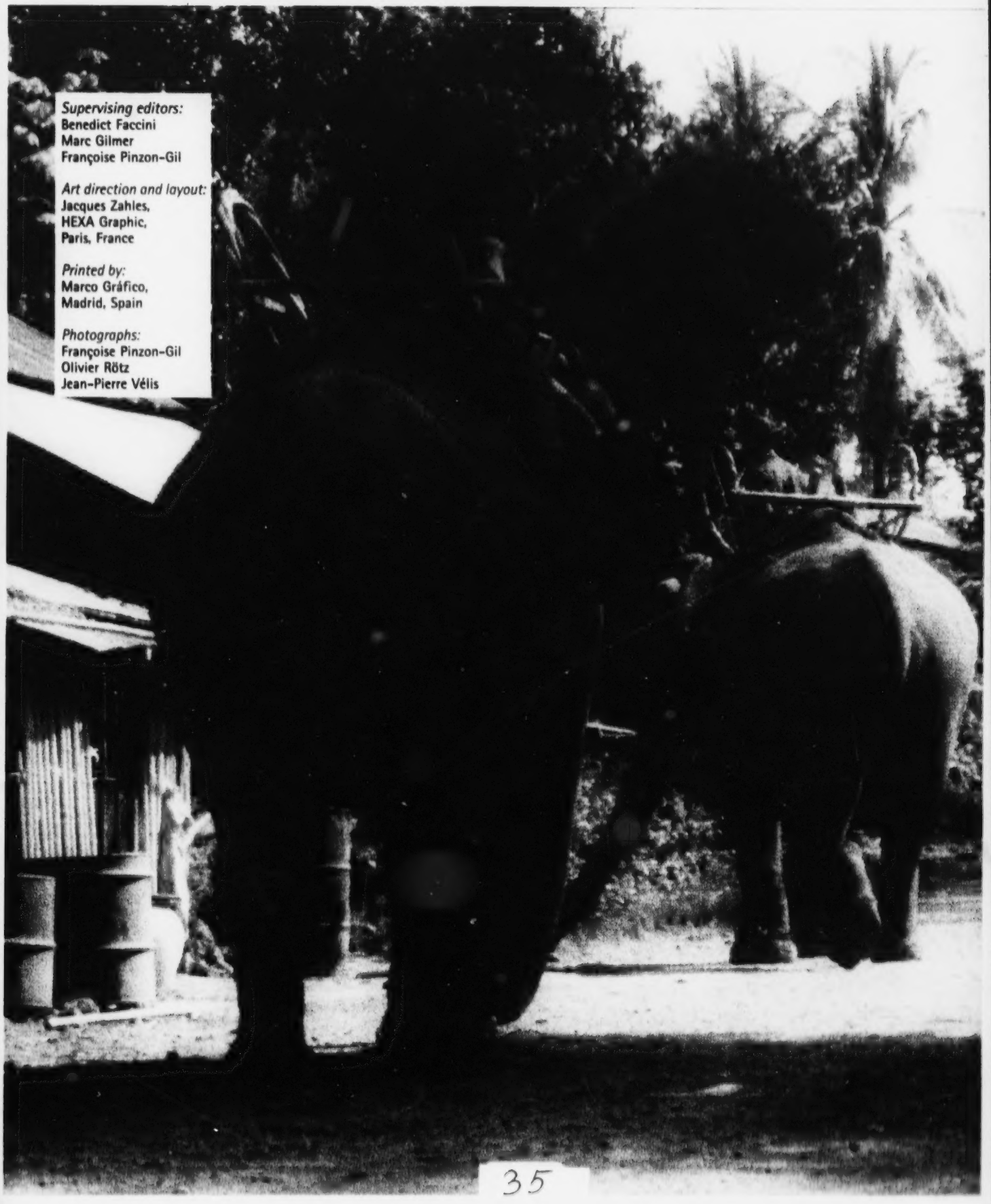

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video was also produced under the 504/LAO/11 project entitled "Life and Hope along the Mekong - Functional Basic Education for Women in the Highlands of Laos." It is available in English, French and Lao.


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# Education to fight *EXCLUSION*

A few years ago, the concept of non-formal education was virtually unknown in the Lao People's Democratic Republic. Today however, many have understood the importance and relevance of minorities. This evolution is, in large part, due to the implementation in several provinces of the "Women's Literacy and Basic Skills Training", a project launched in 1994 by UNESCO with Norwegian funding.

In the Lao People's Democratic Republic, schooling opportunities for girls have been limited for a long time. This is especially true for girls from ethnic minorities (more than fifty minorities in the whole country) and those who live in some of the numerous isolated and mountainous regions. By implementing non-formal educational activities, the project, widely known under its reference, 504/lao/11 has proved that it is possible to transmit basic knowledge, general and technical, to young women who, otherwise, would have no access to education.

Thanks to this project, in four years, thousands of girls and young women have become literate. They have acquired all kinds of skills and knowledge, essential for the improvement of their own and their community's living conditions (health, hygiene, nutrition, etc.). Moreover, they have received basic training in traditional and simple techniques (sewing, weaving) which have allowed them to start up income-generating activities. A vital little boost to their family's well-being.

After such a short period, the project can not pretend to have achieved perfection, and many improvements still seem necessary. Yet it has given a vital impetus to non-formal education in Laos where the concept of this kind of education is blossoming, spreading even into new distance education programmes. But that is another story which is only just beginning.

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